

E is for Ear Infection by [lilies_in_a_vase](#)

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Summary:

He doesn't yell, but Susan still jumps a little out of shock. Billy doesn't speak like that to her. Billy doesn't dare to, because, because Neil will-

Neil will hear. He's just loud enough that Neil hears him from the living room, and comes marching into the kitchen.

"What did you say?" he hisses. "What the hell did I just hear you say?!"

Not on his birthday, Susan thinks. Please, not on his birthday of all days.

“Well?!” Neil implores.

Billy does something that shocks Susan to her core. Something he has never done before.

His face crumbles, and he starts to cry.

E is for Ear Infection

Author's Note:

TRIGGER WARNING:

References to abuse. The F-slur appears once, close to the end.

The first person who took Susan to see a movie was her grandma. She fell in love with them the second she laid eyes on that big screen, those enormous people in black and white, moving about and telling a story.

Once, when she was young, she'd entertained the idea of running off to Los Angeles and becoming an actress. But then she'd met Sam, and they'd gotten married right after school, and soon after they'd had Max, and then Sam had met someone else, someone prettier, and before Susan had even turned thirty-five she'd been married, had a child, and gotten divorced. No more silly dreams are available for a girl like that.

She thinks it's a little funny, then, that her life now involves so much acting.

Acting like she isn't afraid of her husband, putting on a performance in front of her daughter like nothing's wrong, like there isn't anything off with their new family. Acting like she doesn't care about Billy when Neil decides to discipline him, acting like she loves her life.

Everyone in this family has a script, and Susan doesn't know what will happen if someone decides to improvise instead of following it,

line by line and word for word.

It's never happened.

She sometimes imagines it, like a movie tape that's been scratched, how the pictures will get distorted and you won't be able to tell what's happening, won't know how anything will end. If Billy ever hits back, if Max ever finds out, if she tells someone, if Neil kills his son, if Susan takes the axe from the garage and goes to town.

It's Billy's birthday, and Billy's birthday has followed more or less the exact same storyline every year she's known him. They're in a new location this time, but Susan can't imagine it will go any different than before.

She's baked a cake. The same cake she bakes for all their birthdays and special occasions, since she told Neil it was Max' favourite when he asked what she was baking for her daughter's birthday back when they'd first started seeing each other. He'd tried it, liked it, and told her she could make it for Billy's birthday, too.

Billy had never protested, but she thinks that had he been asked, he wouldn't have chosen strawberry, if only because any time she sees him with any sort of candy or sweets he's gotten himself, it's always been chocolate.

But it's not written in her script to question Neil, to go off on intuition or motherly instincts. Susan's role is that of a follower, a side character even in her own story.

She hears the Camaro pull up outside, and turns on the radio. She's got a tape in, the special birthday tape that only has Happy Birthday by different singers on it. She brings it out four times a year, because she thinks it's nice, to be greeted like that when you come home on your birthday. Max always looks like she's both a little embarrassed but still very fond of her mother's antics, and Neil always looks very happy, and Billy, well.

Susan gets the feeling Neil didn't bother celebrating his own birthday, let alone Billy's, before he met her.

The front door opens, and Susan hears Max stomp over to her bedroom. Billy will get two envelopes with money in them, from her and Neil, and then she knows that before they left California, Max got him a novel from some secondhand shop. But she's not certain if Max will give it to him.

They've been angry at each other since they found out they were moving from California, but since that first week in Hawkins, Susan has barely heard them speak to one another.

She'd asked Billy to stop for groceries on the way home, so she's expecting him to come in, hand them to her, maybe give a tiny smile at the music, and leave to go to his room.

Billy walks in, growls, and sets the bag of groceries down on the kitchen counter with a heavy thud. He turns to her and glares through narrowed eyes.

“For God’s sake Susan, can you turn that fucking shit down?”

He doesn’t yell, but Susan still jumps a little out of shock. Billy doesn’t speak like that to her. Billy doesn’t dare to, because, because Neil will-

Neil will hear. He’s just loud enough that Neil hears him from the living room, and comes marching into the kitchen.

“What did you say?” he hisses. “What the hell did I just hear you say?!”

Not on his birthday, Susan thinks. *Please, not on his birthday of all days.*

“Well?!” Neil implores.

Billy does something that shocks Susan to her core. Something he has never done before.

His face crumbles, and he starts to cry.

Susan’s left speechless. Billy turns around and almost runs out of the kitchen. The front door doesn’t quite slam behind him, but the sound of it closing does resound throughout the house.

Neil seems as shocked as she is. Once again, she feels like they're actors, and Billy's just gone off script, and now they don't know what to do. Neither one was trained in improv.

Finally, Neil scoffs, huffs, and walks back into the living room. She hears the TV turn on, muted voices filling the sudden silence Billy left behind.

She doesn't know what she's supposed to do. Make dinner? It might go cold before Billy's back. Will they really eat his birthday dinner without him? Go looking for him? She doesn't think Neil would like it.

Max.

The two of them may be on barely speaking terms, but that doesn't change the fact that out of everyone in this family, Max is the one who spends the most time with Billy.

"Max, sweetheart?" Susan calls, knocking on the door before opening it.

Max is lying down on her stomach on her bed, reading a comic. She barely looks up when Susan steps in. "What?"

"Max," Susan admonishes and gives her daughter a look.

Max looks up at her and smiles sheepishly. “Sorry.”

Susan sighs, leaning back against the wall. “Has Billy been acting... odd?”

Max looks back down at her comic and turns the page. “I think he’s sick,” she says.

Susan stands up a little straighter. “Oh? I... Why do you think that?”

Max sighs but doesn’t look back up at Susan. “Because he’s wearing *way* more layers than usual, and he doesn’t listen to *any* music in the car, or at home, and I’ve seen him rubbing his temples like he’s got a headache.”

“Oh,” Susan breathes. “Thank you, sweetie.”

“Why?”

“Well, we got into a bit of an argument, and Neil overheard. Billy... Billy started crying and left.”

Max raises her head slowly to look up at her, as though she can’t really believe it. “Billy? Billy started crying?”

“Yes. I think I’ll go see if Neil will go look for him with me, if you think he’s sick.”

“Okay,” Max says. Her expression’s still one of disbelief, but Susan knows her daughter well enough to hear the note of worry in her voice.

Susan smiles sadly and leaves, closing the door gently behind her.

Neil’s sitting in his recliner, the TV on and painting his face in harsh shadows. It’s already dark outside, the way it gets in late November. She thinks that had this been a stage, there would’ve been a single spotlight illuminating him, her entering from the side.

“Neil, honey?” Susan asks, a little tentatively. “I talked to Max. She thinks Billy’s sick. And...”

“Yes, Susie?” he says without looking at her. Susan’s getting tired of people not looking at her when she tries to talk to them.

“I thought that might explain why he-“

“Cried like a little girl at just the thought of taking responsibility for the words he says?”

Susan hesitates, then, “You know that usually, I would agree with you, but this time, if- If he’s really sick, then-“

“Then that excuses his behaviour?”

Stop interrupting me.

“No, but, well. You know, when we feel bad, we may say things we don’t really mean. Be bothered by small things that don’t usually bother us.”

Neil sighs. “What do you want me to do, Susie?” He sounds exhausted.

“Can we go look for him?” she says, voice barely louder than a whisper. “It’s going to snow tonight.” *And it’s his birthday.*

Neil gestures at the TV. “I want to finish this. Go get started in dinner. If Billy’s not back, we’ll go look for him, and Maxine can keep watch over the oven. Make sure the house doesn’t burn down,” he mutters, and Susan knows she’s even dismissed. Sometimes she feels more like a housekeeper than a wife.

But Neil gave in quicker than she’d thought. She thinks that, in his own way, he’s just as worried as she is. As unnerved by Billy’s reaction.

She gets started on dinner. Potatoes and fish and sauce and vegetables. Once all that’s left is to get them out of the oven and

make sure the sauce doesn't boil over, she walks over to the bathroom door and knocks. She's heard Max step inside less than a minute ago.

"Max, sweetie? Neil and I are going looking for Billy now. Can you get the food out of the oven when the timer dings? Keep it warm if we're not back by then. Oh, and please set the table and keep an eye on the sauce."

Max mumbles an affirmative and Susan leaves to go looking for Neil.

He's already got his shoes and coat on, pulling on his new gloves. They never did need gloves, back in California.

"Leaving without me?" Susan says, trying for a joke.

"I would never leave you, Susie," Neil says, and she knows it's supposed to be sweet. And yet all it does is fill her with dread.

And she hates that nickname. It's only ever been said by people who want to make her feel small. Cute. Insignificant.

But she just smiles in return and pulls her coat and shoes on, following Neil out to his car.

"Where will we even start? He could be anywhere," Neil asks as he starts the car up and pulls out off the driveway.

“The high school? Hawkins isn’t that big.”

They drive around the centre of town, passing the high school and checking the parking lot, but nothing. No sign of Billy or the Camaro. The radio plays on a low soundtrack to their searching.

“That boy’s going to give me grey hairs,” Neil growls.

Susan lays a calming hand atop his on the gear lever. “Neil.”

He sighs. “Where to next?”

“The quarry,” Susan tries. She’s been up there a few times during her lunch breaks. She’d deny it for fear of Neil finding out if anyone were to ask, but the truth is that she misses California, just like she knows Max and Billy do. She misses her home. The quarry is the closest thing Hawkins has to the ocean.

Susan’s heart drops to the pit of her belly when they get there. In the flashing red and blue lights of a police car, she can see the back of the Camaro.

“Neil,” she says, her hand shooting out to land on his, but he’s already seen it, pulling off to the side of the road and parking the car.

He turns his hand around and takes her in his grasp. Neither one makes a move to step out.

He's dead, Susan thinks. They were too late. He's dead, Max was right and he was sick and he threw up at the wheel and lost control of the car and crashed it into a tree.

Beneath the pads of her fingers, Neil's pulse is racing.

He breathes in deep and lets go, as though he can tell she's noticed how scared he is. He steps out of the car, and a moment later Susan follows, staying back while Neil walks closer to the police car.

"Officer?" he calls.

"Chief. Chief Hopper," a man introduces himself as, stepping out of the shadows. He's tall, taller than her, taller than Neil, with a hat on that keeps the upper part of his face in shadow. There's the beginning of a thick moustache on his upper lip. "You the new family that moved in, aren't you? The Hargroves?"

"That's right," Neil says.

Chief Hopper points back at the Camaro with his thumb. "This one belong to you, then? The car was unlocked, and I found him sleeping in the backseat-"

Susan lets out a breath of relief so loud the Chief turns to look at her. She gets the feeling he hasn't noticed her until then, and is a little surprised. Despite her quiet nature, she's so tall most people's eyes are immediately drawn to her anyway. The great paradox of her being. She thinks it's part of why she felt attracted to Neil to begin with; as long as he was next to her, most people's attention was drawn to his commanding presence instead of landing on her.

"Right," the Chief says. "Anyway, he can't stay here. It's going to snow tonight. I was about to wake him up and take him to the station, but if you're here, then I guess you can just take him home and we'll call it a day. Any idea what he was doing out here?"

"His little sister thinks he's ill," Neil says, looking at her over his shoulder. "Susie, will you...?"

Susan nods, walking past the two men and up to the Camaro. Up close, she can tell Billy hadn't crashed, he'd just parked very, very haphazardly. The door to the backseat is left open, probably from when the Chief checked on him.

Billy's asleep, head pillowed on his arms and curled into a little ball.

She leans down so she's halfway inside the car, shaking his shoulder. Billy groans, and presses himself back against the seat, away from her. He doesn't wake up.

She needs him to wake up, to speak to her. She needs to find out how bad it is, if it's enough to get him home or if she needs to try to convince Neil to take them to the hospital.

She climbs in a little further, stroking his hair away from his face, brushing past his ear.

Billy flinches, whimpering, and Susan frowns, leaning closer to get a better look.

There's pus leaking from his ear. She sighs in sudden understanding.

Neil's shaking the Chief's hand when she steps back out. The Chief nods at her and jumps back into his car, leaving them alone. The street's dark in the sudden absence of lights from his car, the trees tall and somehow threatening.

"I think he's got an ear infection. There's... pus, leaking out of his ears. It would explain why the music bothered him so much. Maxine could stand any noise when she had it a couple of years back."

"Right," Neil says, hands in his pocket and nodding. "Drive behind me in the Camaro and we'll get home. Maxine shouldn't be alone when it's dark out."

She turns back and gets into the driver's seat of the Camaro. The keys are left in the ignition, and Billy moans as she starts the car, following Neil all the way home.

While Neil parks up on the driveway, she chooses Billy's usual spot

on the street in front of the house. She steps out, and is just about to open the door to the backseat and try to wake Billy, when she hears the door open. She turns around, and Neil's already there.

He scoops Billy out of the car, carrying him in his arms. It's a strange image. Billy, usually so strong and intimidating for a teenager, being carried in his father's arms. He looks like the child he is.

And Neil doesn't seem to be breaking a sweat. It's a stark reminder as to how strong he actually is. How easily he could break her with just one punch if he ever wanted to. Or if he lost enough control.

But he looks gentle now. Susan's not used to Neil being gentle with his son.

"Open the door," Neil says quietly, and Susan hurries to comply. She wonders if it's just because it's Billy's birthday. If there exists some sentimental part of Neil that feels like Billy deserves some semblance of softness on his birthday.

Max sticks her head out of the kitchen when she hears them come inside. Her eyes widen at the sight they make, and she disappears back around the corner. Susan doesn't think Neil saw her.

She follows him, opening the door to Billy's bedroom and staying in the doorway while he lays him down on his bed.

"He's got a fever," Neil says, voice barely louder than a whisper. He

reaches out, stroking Billy's hair and cupping the back of his head, thumb brushing those long curls.

It feels wrong for her to watch this. Like this should be some hidden little aspect of Neil that no one gets to see. She wonders what it means, that he doesn't mind her seeing him do it. This is the closest to emotional she's seen him act since the day of their wedding.

"Close the door, Susie. And put a plate of dinner away for him, in the fridge. He can eat it tomorrow." He sighs, laughing a little quietly. Like he's exasperated, but not really angry. "I've got to get him out of these goddamn jeans."

Neil hates Billy's jeans. Hates how tight they are. Hates how 'he struts around in them like a fucking faggot, showing off his ass'.

She wonders if, on some level, Neil thinks what he's doing is right. Thinks that he's doing it out of love. She... She knows, or at least she thinks she knows, that he doesn't hate his son, that he believes hitting him is the only thing that will make him understand, will get him to behave in the way he wants him to. She wonders if he's worried. If he's scared that Billy really is... gay, that he'll go to Hell, that he'll die in the epidemic, that he'll never get a good life. She wonders if Neil thinks it's normal, that it's right, what he does to his son, if it happened to him and he thinks that was the correct way for a parent to behave. She's seen some scars, when they've had sex, that she doesn't know if they're from his time in the military or something else. She's never dared ask.

But then, maybe it doesn't matter. It's twisted, either way, the way the hands stroking Billy's hair right now had broken knuckles less than a month ago from colliding with his face, torso, and wherever

else Neil got to when Billy brought Max home in the middle of the night, speech slurred and eyes unfocused.

She closes the door and goes into the kitchen.

Max is sitting there, the table set with the food brought out, steam rising against the plastic lids she'd put on them. She's brought her comic out with her, reading it at the table.

Susan walks up to her and puts her arms around her daughter, holding her tight.

"Mum?" Max asks.

"I love you so much," Susan whispers. "So, so much."

Max is silent for a moment. Then, "Is Billy okay?"

"We think he's got an ear infection. He's sleeping now."

"Okay."

"You hungry?"

“Yeah.”

Susan steps back. “Then we’ll eat. I’ll put a plate away for Billy.”

The dinner’s quiet. Neil tells her to get the cake out, too, because ‘it would be a shame for it to go to waste. I’m sure Maxine’s been looking forward to it’.

They eat a little less than half of it.

It’s strange. Birthday dinner without the birthday boy.

Neil tells her he’ll go to bed early. He’s got first shift at work tomorrow. Susan wishes him a good night. Max goes to take a shower. Susan sits at the kitchen table, staring at the cake, and can’t really bring herself to put it away yet.

She should see if Billy’s awake. If he wants a piece. She should give him his gifts, put them in his room even if he’s still asleep. She-

She could give him something better.

She stands up, walking down the hallway with quiet steps and pausing outside her bedroom door. Neil’s snoring inside. Sleeping deeply.

She walks out to her car, not bothering with a coat, and opens her glove compartment.

When they were moving to Hawkins, Neil had dug up some old photo albums he'd kept out of view somewhere, and thrown them all in the trash. Susan had been curious, so she'd rescued them to see what they were.

Her suspicions had been correct. Photographs of Neil and Billy's mum, Billy's mum by herself, baby Billy, toddler Billy, Billy with his mum, and on and on.

She hadn't been able to rescue them all, but she'd taken enough photographs to fill a manila envelope to the point of bulging. Then she'd thrown the albums back into the trash. She'd been planning on giving it to Billy on his eighteenth, but she figures he could use a pick-me-up right about now.

She takes it back in with her. Max is still showering, Neil still snoring.

Susan grabs a tray and cuts a piece of cake, putting it on a plate she places on the tray along with a glass of water, Advil, and the envelope.

She takes it all with her into Billy's bedroom, putting it down on his nightstand and turning on the table lamp there.

Billy's turned on his side, facing the wall, his covers pulled up all the way to his chin. But he doesn't breathe like he's sleeping.

"Billy?" Susan whispers, mindful of the way his ears probably hurt.

"Susan?" Billy mumbles in answer, sounding a little confused.

"Yes," Susan answers. "I brought you cake. An Advil. And... a birthday present."

"Oh," Billy breathes. "Did... Did my dad change my clothes?"

He sounds like he's about to cry again Susan's heart breaks for him. "He did, yes."

He lets out a little sob. Susan decides to pretend she didn't hear it. She reaches out, squeezing his arm above the covers. "Happy birthday, Billy," she says, standing up. She closes his door behind her and goes to bed.

Author's Note:

I'm sorry guys, I promise the next one will be a little happier! It's got Steve in it!